

A RECORD OF HIS RAPTURES

American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin. Terrance Hayes. New York: Penguin Books, 2018.

Kevin O'Connor

The sheer verbal energy and imaginative sweep of Terrance Hayes's poetry has made the appearance of each successive collection an important literary event. Readers have become accustomed to hearing a poet full of passion and humor and wild linguistic inventiveness. Employing a variety of rhetorical modes, syntactic rhythms and quick-shifting tonal registers, Hayes' creates a distinctive demotic music, and his breadth of ambition and variety of expressive voices beg comparison to the Whitman who wrote, "I am large. I contain multitudes." A series of seventy identically titled sonnets written during the first two hundred days of the Trump presidency, *American Sonnets for my Past and Future Assassin*, successfully blurs the distinction between a politically engaged poetry, on one hand, and a formally coherent, meditative poetry, on the other. By distinguishing his sonnets as "American," Hayes emphasizes how a traditional form which originated and flourished in European court life can serve playfully innovative and often subversive purposes. While the "eternal lines" of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* is the first and appropriate model of comparison for such a sequence, I am not sure I can find an analogue in the Bard for Hayes's frothy mix of colloquial dictions such as, "Shout outs to vixens/ And bitches out their twerking for fucks in Bluff Estates." But beyond asking what constitutes the "American" in a time of growing economic inequality and murderous reactionary racism—not to mention the corrosive mendacity of an unhinged "Trumpet" presidency—these often brilliant, always rich lyrics also identify and examine the poisonous seeds of our national "past" and omens of our collective social "future." Playing off the amorous inspiration of Italian and English sonnet sequences addressed to a beloved, each of Hayes's sonnets iterate the quest to determine the identity of, or the speaker's relationship with, the "Assassin"—the personification of the exigent, mortal fears of the black poet as well as of the more intangible fears of the national collective. The title thus delineates Hayes's preoccupations in this and in his previous five volumes—*Muscular Music* (1999), *Hip Logic* (2002), *Wind in a Box* (2006), *Lighthouse* (2010), and *How to Be Drawn* (2016): the effects of racial injustice, the complexities of masculine self-imaging, the dynamic of family relations, the destructive and healing power of language, and the exploration

of identity—viewed not only in the political terms of race, class, gender, but also in the existential terms of the individuated personality. Despite the book's title and the tragic urgency of the underlying social pathologies it explores, Hayes imbues his collection with enough wit and jazzy linguistic dances, as well as dark humored insight, to offer a cathartic buoyancy and bluesy pleasure to its readers.

Hayes is preoccupied in *American Sonnets* by *ars poetica* because he so often wrestles with the line between political statement and the relatively private and self-enclosed space of an intimately meditative genre. Testing Auden's line that "poetry makes nothing happen," Hayes sonnets work both sides of the street: some poems and passages seem to want to escape their artful context and to be taken as straightforward pronouncement:

America, you just wanted change is all, a return
 To the kind of awe experienced after beholding a reign
 Of gold. A leader whose metallic narcissism is a reflection
 Of your own.

While expressing a more temperate sentiment, these prosaic lines show some affinity with Amiri Baraka's in his notorious "Black Art":

...we want "poems that kill."
 Assassin poems. Poems that shoot
 Guns. Poems that wrestle cops into alleys

The Baraka's passage is more hortatory and provocative, but both passages are "politically" tendentious even if their aesthetic contexts undercut, or at least ironize, their affect. This tension fuels the book's impetus toward *ars poetica*, most explicitly in the beginning of the book's seventh poem:

I lock you in an American sonnet that is part prison,
 Part panic closet, a little room in a house set aflame.
 I lock you in a form that is part music box, part meat
 Grinder to separate the song of the bird from the bone.
 I lock your persona in a dream inducing sleeper hold
 While your better selves watch from the bleachers.
 I make you both gym & crow here.

The addressed "you" is at once the elusive, ubiquitous "Assassin" and the projected reader as well as the daemon of the poet overheard interrogating himself. But in Hayes's hands the familiar metaphor of the poem as confined space or "box" becomes a proactive and even preemptive measure,

rather than an aesthetic retreat, in response to a multivalent threat. (Neither can readers forget that incarceration rates for blacks are five times higher than for whites.) In so far as language is social power, Hayes' talent for deconstructive punning on a term of systematic oppression, "gym & crow," provides another coded trope in the poem's tight symmetrical closing:

I make you a box of darkness with a bird in its heart.
 Voltas of acoustics, instinct and metaphor. It is not enough
 To love you. It is not enough to want you destroyed.

The source and target of these fierce, conflicted feelings exist outside in the world of Black Lives Matter (e.g. the killings of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown and others) and the racist provocations of the country's president, as within the writer's self-made "box of darkness." Examining his own complicated tendencies in his recent essay "As For Langston Hughes," Hayes distinguishes his own poetry from that of both the meliorist Hughes and the flame-throwing Baraka, asserting his efforts "to avoid the righteousness of the Nobel Negro or an outraged militant." *American Sonnets* bears the fruit of this poised tension as Hayes "remains tethered to the paradox and bewilderment of poetics and politics."

American Sonnets also extends and intensifies a generic strain in Hayes' work evident from his third volume, *Wind in a Box*, a collection bookended by two eponymous sonnets. The end of the book's opening poem, whose rhythmic signature Hayes has described as an "exercise in staccato sentences," mirrors its beginning:

... This ink. This name. This blood
 And wonder. This box. This body in a box. This blood
 In the body. This wind in the blood.

The "instinct & metaphor" of *American Sonnets* is explicitly predicted in this early foundational passage as Hayes maps the trajectory of self-exploration ("This name") as a physical ("This body") field of play ("This box"), which spans from the circumscribed space of a visible art work ("This ink.") to the outer reaches of physical and metaphysical space ("and wonder"). A visual artist and a former college basketball player, Hayes's meaning-making maneuvers derive from the sonnet's limited "field of play," the edges of its formal canvas.

While he allowed himself more expansive freedoms in his two collections previous to *American Sonnets*—*Lighthouse* and *How to Be Drawn*—Hayes has spoken of working his "way back to compression via the son-

net.” At the same time, considered as one long sequence, *American Sonnets* follows the poet’s predilection for riffing freely off of a central conceit: *Wind in a Box* features a “blue” sequence, where “The Blue Melvin” recalls a time when there was no other form of protest “because no one believed words/ were more important than music”; the *Lighthouse* poems clone a lyric persona who wants to sing free of gravity, as in “Shakur,” the elegiac tribute to the late rap artist, whom the speaker identifies with as “a light/Long-
ing for lightness,,,”; in *How to Be Drawn*, Hayes assumes a wide variety of instructive personae who, often inspired by visual and musical art, explore the relationship between self-expression and the threat of being defined or erased by others, as in “How to Draw an Invisible Man,” where the speaker finds a “sludge/ Of arterial words” while performing a literary autopsy on the corpse of Ralph Ellison.

Hayes published only one sonnet in *How to Be Drawn*, “American Sonnet for Wanda C.,” but it has become the inspirational seed of this collection. In his Acknowledgments Hayes quotes the late poet on the form of her jazz sonnets, “with certain properties—progression, improvisation, mimicry etc.,” and on her motive, “to have fun—to blow my soul.” In his intimate personal homage Hayes digs into a deep, emotionally vulnerable register of identification and grief: “...I am her son, pent in blackness and turning the night’s calm/ Loose and letting the same blood fire through me.” Likewise the closing passage in the final poem of *How To Be Drawn*, “Ars Poetica for the Ones Like Us,” looks ahead to this experimental sonnet sequence:

The crisis is initiated by the absence of witness,
That Orpheus, in time, became nothing
But a lying ass song
Sung for the woman he failed

Having reminded himself of the perilous stakes of overreaching or underperforming, the poet extends the “How To” conceit to *American Sonnets* in “The song must be cultural, confessional, clear” (first line as title):

The song must turn on the compass
Of language like a tangle of wire endowed
With feeling. The notes must tear and tear,
There must be a love for the minute & minute,
There must be a record of witness and daydream.

In Hayes' hands *ars poetica* are not just rarified meditations on a second order activity: they act, first of all, as a survival manual for an ambitious black poet trying to make meaningful art amid exigent social threats in the era of Trump:

But Assassin, they'll probably murder you. Do you ask,
Why you should die for me if I will not die for you? I do.

The number of unarmed black males killed in America in recent years alone might remind readers how and why these self-questioning *ars poetica* exert a cumulative centrifugal force: "That is to say/ A nigga can survive" ("Probably twilight makes blackness dangerous").

Like all distinctive, original art, each of Hayes's successive collections teaches us how to read and understand it in its own evolving terms. The *ars poetica* sonnets, therefore, are essential as a guide to the aesthetic and political and moral ambitions of the book as a whole; and beyond any affective design on its contemporary readers, *American Sonnets* also serves simply as a testament and witness to one poet's life of feeling: "I mean to leave/ A record of my raptures." ("Inside me is a black-eyed animal")

Beyond the instructive sonnets, Hayes's rhetorical range and variety dazzle throughout the collection: for instance, in the course of successive poems in the first sequence of fourteen sonnets (the listed first-line titles themselves make up five aggregate sonnets in the book's appendix), the speaking voices, offshoots of a single sensibility, move from that of an affectively descriptive date-seeker ("A brother versed in ideological & material swagger/Seeks dime-ass trill bitch...") to a defensively argumentative cultural warrior ("But there never was a black male hysteria/As if you weren't the spouse of Toni Morrison") to a passionately homiletic street-preacher ("Our sermon today concerns the dialectic/Blessings in transgression & transcendence.")—and then a few poems later, back to his "through line" of an intimately self-questioning poet ("Maybe I was too hard on Derek Walcott/ In preschool while I lay on a nylon cot"). But regardless of any particular rhetorical keynote in Hayes's elastic and electric Sonnets-of-Myself, his subtle, lightning-quick modulations of tone, his "Voltas of acoustics," from line to line—sometimes even within lines themselves—stretch the parameters of the sonnet form and keep readers alert to their surprising moment-to-moment subversions. For example, in order to expose the hyper-masculinity of "Trumpet" as defensive denial, the speaker in the final poem of second sequence, "If you have never felt what is fluid," moves from disdainful instruction to self-exposing testimony to funky moralization:

Mister Trumpet if you do not know
 The first man was in fact a woman whose clit
 Grew so swollen with longing it hung like a finger
 Pointing toward the lover stirring her meadows
 Mister Trumpet what the fuck do you know
 You are lonely because you could never unhitch
 Your mother's terrifying radiant woe
 I mean my mother here she the crazy bitch in me
 She the way I weep the way I break she manly
 Trumpet I can't speak for you but men like me
 Who have never made love to a man will always be
 Somewhere in the folds of our longing ashamed of it

The rhetorical turn from “you” to “I” is accompanied by the radical downshift in diction from soaring eloquence (“terrifying radiant woe”) to regressive trans-grammatical authenticity (“She the way..”) and up again to a confident, radical critique of a more conventional etiology of desire

Readers might at first wonder why Hayes at this critical historical moment would choose as his expressive vehicle the sonnet, which is arguably the most traditional and paradigmatic form of the modern Western lyric. But the question implies the answer: while some radical purists might understandably eschew a poetic form with four hundred years of Eurocentric taint accumulated since the Renaissance, more ambitious cultural warriors will insist on making their progressive mark on an enduring and tested mode of thought. Hayes's *American Sonnets* prompts us to reflect on how many accomplished African American poets have been drawn to the form: James Weldon Johnson (“Mother Night”), Paul Laurence Dunbar (“Douglas”), Claude McKay (“the Lynching”), Sterling Brown (“Salutamas”), Langston Hughes (“Christ in Alabama”), Countee Cullen (“Yet Do I Marvel”), Robert Haydon (“Those Winter Sundays”), Gwendolyn Brooks (“Gay Chaps at the Bar”), Derek Walcott (“Homage to Edward Thomas”), June Jordan (“Sunflower Sonnet Number Two”), Michael Palmer (“Pre-Petrarchan Sonnet”), Marilyn Nelson (“Beauty Shoppe”), Rita Dove (“Sonnet in Primary Colors”)—not to mention Hayes's contemporaries like Natasha Trethewey (“Native Guard”), Tracy Smith (“The Speed of Belief”), Kevin Young (“De La Soul Is Dead”), Tamblyn Jess (“Blind Tom Plays for the Confederate Troops, 1963”) and surely countless others. As if it were not enough for African Americans to have engendered the most influential national art forms of blues and jazz, black writers have also felt compelled to take on the challenge posed by literary assimilation: to speak truth to power within the linguistic contours of the historical oppressor. In this way, black writing may come to influence American letters in the 21st Century much

in the same way that Irish writing—from Yeats and Joyce to Heaney and Beckett—came to exert an inordinate influence on writing in English in the 20th Century.

Hayes's jazzy *American Sonnets* retain the *sine qua non* mystique of the fourteen lines as well as “a clamor/ Of voltas.” If he brings an individual stamp or signature to the form itself, it is by way of his naturally longer colloquial line pushing against the confines of a ghostly pentameter where the iambic may remain the natural no-fault setting, but is only returned to briefly for refueling before the next improvisational metric flight. Adapting a stylistic concept of Frost, Hayes uses both meter and line length as variable according to his rhythmic “sentence sense” within any given sonnet. For instance, the climactic turn in the sonnet, “The earth of my nigga eyes are assassinated,” is signaled when the loosely overflowing anaphoric sentence pattern shifts into a quick, emphatic tone of defiance:

You assassinate the smell of my breath, which is like
Smoke, milk, twilight itself. You assassinate my tongue
Which is like the head of a turtle wearing my skull as a shell.
You assassinate my lovely legs & the muscular hook of my cock
Still, I speak for the dead. You will never assassinate my ghosts.

Hayes's graphic dramatization of assaultive threats on “the black body” reflects a language that can sustain rhythmic regularity, but which is always ready to “turn” sharply toward assertive truths.

Beyond serving as a self-interrogating survival manual for the 21st century American, Hayes's sonnets tend to explore three main areas: racial politics; the intersection of race and gender; and the identity of the writing poet, no less representative than Whitman—a white, gay male American with a visionary politics, but also a shape-shifting and empathetic writer, addressing the most diverse audience imaginable—who is concerned with human personhood irrespective of any politically or culturally or ethnically categorizable identity. Ironized and yet too real, the allegorical figure of the “Assassin” in these poems is primarily charged by a pervasive, deeply atavistic American racism. In response to this ubiquitous and metamorphic threat, Hayes writes poems that move between invective satire, ritual hex and exorcism, and meditative etiology of a rabid, socially contagious disease. The litany of actual assassins in “I pour pinch of serious poison for you,” acts as summoning curse and as cathartic venting:

James Earl Ray Dylann Roof I pour a punch of piss
For you George Zimmerman John Wilkes Booth

.....

I pour unmerciful panic into your river I damn you
 With the opposite of prayer Byron De La Beckwith
 Roy Bryant J.W. Milam Edgar Ray Killen Assassins

The sonnet's turn in the last four lines pits idealistic abstractions against the punning verb of violent revenge:

Love trumps power or blood to trump power
 Beauty trumps power or blood to trump power
 Justice trumps power or blood to trump power
 The names alive are like the names in the graves

I hear the poem's last line—repeated from an earlier sonnet which named the places of recent racial “assassinations”—not only as testament to the memorializing and replenishing power of language, but also as its opposite, as if to utter the infamous names of tragedy is to re-enact the murderous power of revenant racism in an effort to exorcise it. The names evoke Hayes's presiding ghosts of “past and future.”

Other sonnets meditatively explore the process of unconscious racist conditioning, as in “Even the most kindhearted white woman,”

Dragging herself through traffic with her nails
 On the wheel & her head in a chamber of black
 Modern American music may begin, almost
 Carelessly, to breathe *n*-words.

But since the *n*-word (“No word leaves me more graced with shame”) is disseminated by the self-authorizing expression of black culture, the discrete identity of the “assassin” here is complicated. At times the racial group antagonists seem to mirror, if not engender, one another, as if the Jungian shadow of individual psyches always harbored and evoked its racial Other.

My mother says I am beautiful inside,
 And out. But my lover never believed it.

.....

I am my lover's bewildering shadow.
 My lover's bewildering shadow is mine.

This sonnet digs down into the deepest sources of self-image and projected *anima* as they are confirmed or denied in social relationships—and then leads back to the speaker's poignant reflection on the ontology of threat and fear:

Assassin, you are a mystery
 to me, I say to my reflection sometimes.
 You are beautiful because of your sadness, but
 you would be more beautiful without your fear.

If for Wallace Stevens “death is the mother of beauty,” for Hayes fear can be the mother of toxic self-doubt, and the “Assassin” can be internalized like the projected self-hatred of white racists. But Hayes’s poems do not absolve racist crimes by appeals to deterministic psychology: in the historical and social realm, this poetry couldn’t be clearer about describing our moral legacy as relating to “the way descendants/ Of the raped relate to the descendants of the rapists.” As for the fear that haunts, in “Suppose you could speak nothing but money,” Hayes clarifies and extends his moral indictment:

I ain’t mad at you,
 Assassin. It’s not the bad people who are brave
 I fear, it’s the good people who are afraid.

American Sonnets is anything but a conventional appeal to liberal guilt and pity. Even victims proffered as grounding testimony—“Something happens everywhere in this country/ Every day. Someone is praying, someone is prey”—become part of Hayes’s metaphorizing wordplay about religion and sacrifice, or about how even racial martyrs invite reductive monetary reparation: “When MLK was shot his blood changed to change.” The poet’s questions are as much self-probing as they are rhetorical:

How much have black people been paid for naming
 Emmett Till in poems? How much is owed? Never mind.

The poet’s Yeatsian “quarrel with himself,” extends especially to his five sonnets (one in each section) beginning with the line, “But there never was a black male hysteria.” This sequence is breathtaking in its display of internal dialectics which reaches sympathetically toward a wider definition of masculinity called for by feminist and LGBTQ critiques. Hayes has enough self-confidence to address the intersectionality of gender and race, in the repeated assertion that becomes a self-ironizing version of Gertrude’s view in *Hamlet*: “The black male speaker doth protest too much methinks.” Here, Laura Mulvey’s feminist concept of the “male gaze” undergoes a masculinist reversal and is further complicated beyond Du Bois’s “double consciousness” by the reifying context of the “white gaze”:

There was a black male review for ladies night

At the nightclub. There was a black male review
 By the suits in the offices, the courts & waiting rooms.
 There was a black male review in the weight rooms
 Where coaches licked their whistle. Reviews,
 Once-overs, half studies, misreads & night
 Mares looped the news.

Cataloguing spheres of threat or exploitation or judgment—social-sexual, commercial, legal, athletic, cultural, existential—framed by allusion to the lynching of Emmett Till, the poem demonstrates the overwhelming evidence for the *reasonable* fears of black males responding to *unreasonable* or “hysterical” provocations: “the stares you got were crazy.” As a critic-reviewer of *American Sonnets*, I cannot help but reflect on my own complicit “gaze,” and recognize the inclusive embrace of Hayes’s response, at once inviting and preemptive:

I have sent tickets of this show to my white friend
 Who is determined to write about black people
 And to my black friend determined to police him.

Another sonnet denying “black male hysteria” becomes an ironic tribute to the strong black female artist, “As if you weren’t the spouse of Toni Morrison,/ Forced by love to watch her flower.”—who, through her gendered intra-racial perspective, makes the black male image more complex: “The hysteria of being multiplied and divided/ In your lover’s mind until you go out of your mind.” The speaker further confronts fears about his masculine self-image through identification with a self-denying gay poet, imagining himself the lover of Langston Hughes, who was “high yellow/ In public, afraid of himself.” If to name and face the fear are the first of graduated steps, in his final hysteria poem Hayes returns to a weaponized word: “As if being called a *Nigger* never makes you/ Disappear.” If language is the ultimate forum for both social and self-definition, by transforming his fears into the song of *American Sonnets*, Hayes creates a counterforce to a pervasive linguistic environment that threatens to erase people like himself.

Exposing his own “male hysteria” goes hand-in-hand with the speaker’s relentless assaults on the dangerously self-denying character of the American psyche. As a grotesque personification of the culture’s overcompensating projection of whiteness and masculine virility, Trump becomes the iconic target of Hayes blistering diagnosis:

America’s struggle with itself
 Has always had people like me at the heart of it. You can’t

Grasp your own hustle, your blackness, you can't grasp
Your own pussy, your black pussy dies for touch.

Using blunt street language that intensifies the satirist's technique of radical reductionism, Hayes's insists that "blackness," an invention of racial hierarchizing, is at the center of America's psychic self-denial. But this premise, explored by writer's black and white—Faulkner, Ellison, O'Connor, Morrison, to name just a few—is hardly new. Hayes's distinctive contribution has to do with the light-footedness and range and specificity of his lyrics, where he can move quickly from intimate self-revelation to rhetorical indictment. Apart from race, the book's funky half-ironized feminist Ur-myths—with allusions to Jesus' sister and the genesis of the sexes from an original female whose "clit grew/ So swollen with longing it grew into a finger"—are particular joys of reading *American Sonnets*: the reader can appreciate the half-comic self-interrogations of the author of *Muscular Music* as he suffers the power and truth of his feminine daemon. Having previously drawn and identified with Orpheus as the inventor of song and writing, Hayes in these sonnets speculates that Eurydice may be the actual poet whose "muse/ Has his back to her with his ear bent to his own heart." It is no wonder why James Baldwin and Maxine Waters become heroic personal counterpoints to the macho bluster and "metallic narcissism" of Trump, especially in their association with feminine fluidity:

My grandmother's name had water
In it too, Water maker. I have wept listening
To Aretha Franklin sing Precious Lord. I have placed
My thumb on the tongue of a black woman
With an unbreakable voice. I love your mouth,
Flood gate, storm door, you are black as the gap
In Baldwin's teeth, you are black as Baldwin's speech.
I love how your blackness leaves them in the dark.
I love how even your sound-bite leaves a mark.

This passage is as good as any to illustrate what Hayes himself has called a poetic "personality" as opposed to an "identity" categorized by race, gender, class, etc. While Hayes believes poets like Baraka were limited by writing one-dimensional "race" poems, the above excerpt shows the dense texture of a poetic sensibility, only one of whose passions is reflected in his praise of these politically engaged black leaders.

Hayes also reaches beyond the beautifully idiosyncrasies of "personality" toward an existential self imagined in archetypally familial terms:

I remain a mystery to my father.
 My father remains a mystery to me
 Christianity is a religion built around a father
 Who does not rescue his son. It is the story
 Of a son whose father is a ghost. No one
 Mentions Jesus' sister.

Hayes has written some fierce, tender, poignant poems about his own fathers—both about the beloved step-father who raised him in “The Same City” from *Hip Logic*, as well as about his long absent biological father, whom he encounters as an adult in *Lighthouse's* “An Arbor for Butch.” Beyond the fraught Joycean territory of father-son identification, these sonnets continue to confront and exorcise the hauntings of ancestors, albeit without the comically bullhorned invocations of “Black Confederate Ghost Story” from *How to Be Drawn*:

Attention, African-American apparitions hung,
 Burned, or drowned before anyone alive was born:
 Please make a mortifying midnight appearance

For in *American Sonnets* the too recent killings of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown et al. seem to make the hauntings less susceptible to such a high-flown comic seances and exorcisms, as if “the names”—whether of recent assassins or assassinated, confederate statues or infamous killing sites—can only evoke elegiac grief, at once raw and exhausted:

I remember my sister's last hoorah.
 She joined all the black people I'm tired of losing.
 All the dead from parts of Florida, Ferguson,
 Brooklyn, Charleston, Cleveland, Chicago,
 Baltimore, wherever the names alive are
 Like the names in the graves.

The poet seems to want to write through his anger and grief—and especially his fear—to find a future self where the assassins and assassinated are one and redeemable, where the Yeatsian breach between Self and Soul is imaginatively healed:

Sweetness? Poor, ragged Heart, blind, savage
 Heart. I've almost grown tired of talking to you.

If the Assassin is part of the poet, centrifugal political speech must give way to the internal struggle of a visionary poetics, where “You have to heal your-

self to truly be heroic.” (“I only intend to send word to my future”)

Time is always problematic in Hayes’s poetry, as in the voice of Light-head, who announces, “I am hear because I could never get the hang of Time.” Since in *American Sonnets*, “Self-perpetuation is a war against Time,” and “only the dead are slaves,” we must take his dating-ad poems seriously:

...Must be willing to raise orchids
Or kids in a land of assassins; willing to wield a fluid
Expression in the war her lover wages against himself
And a silver tongue in the war we wage against death.

This last line is important because Hayes is an engaged black poet who shows little interest in religious eschatology, but who ultimately views racial and gender conflict as a manifestation of a more primary existential conflict. The *métier* of poets like Hayes is neither social analysis nor satiric invective, but dramatized lyrical excavations of the socially situated self. In the deepest part of his vision, social wounds are neither excused nor forgotten, but along with the traumatic consequences of an individual’s bad choices, they can help reveal a self whose compassion is based in common self-alienation and vulnerability:

a layer of mischief so traumatized trauma
Delighted me beneath the tremendous
Stupendous horrendous undiscovered stars
Burning where I didn’t know how to live
My friends were all the wounded people
The black girls that held their own hands
Even the white boys who grew into assassins

I think parts of all of these sonnets are consciously motley and ragged and “unfinished,” where allusions to Shakespeare mix with those to rap and hip hop, where ordinary and unpretty talk is mixed with graceful lyric flights in a quest to capture authentic poetic truths beyond any exclusivist criteria of formalist aesthetics. But in this way the final sonnet seems almost anomalous, highly wrought and intentionally placed, almost as if in its quiet, meditative indirection, it asks to be read as a coda for the entire collections:

When I am close enough, I am reminded
Of the mythic orchid called Lorca’s Breath.
Named by Salvador Dali a decade after the poet
Was killed, the flower is said to sprout petals

The shade of a swollen moon but once or twice
 Before it dies. Also lost was the painting
 Dali painted of Lorca's writing hand: a long
 Almost animal shadow crawling over land shaped
 Like a man with the body of a woman. A cuff
 Of celestial texture. A button of ruby. The orchid's
 Mouth is the shade of pussy, its leaves hang
 As if listening to a lover whisper with her back
 To you. Rumor that this flower first appeared
 Near wherever Lorca is buried, I know to be untrue.

At first reading, the sonnet seems far away in tone and musical form from much of the sequence it closes: where are the Trumpets of murderous racism and sexism? the “clamor of Voltas” and street-wise dictions that want to subvert the niceties of formal expectations? Without the jarring appearance of the word “pussy,” we might mistake this for the nuanced style of a decorous, if not precious, aesthete. But the poem turns out to be just one more reminder of Hayes's impressive range. Finishing his “wind in a box” of jazzy sonnets, he can't resist leaving more hints about how to read them. The social justice issues are all there---the backdrop of the war against Fascism, the gay poet as martyr, Yeats's apocalyptic sphinx as sexual enigma, the elegiac problem of “names in the grave”...even a whispering muse—but in his glancing indirection, the speaker seems reflectively distanced and relatively soft-spoken, cautiously skeptical of poetry's effect on any of these huge, blaring targets, as if reminding himself again of the limits of language to prevent or sufficiently commemorate, if not redeem, the tragic traumas it presents—but also of the truth that on this side of the grave, it is still important to name and to witness—to set “the record of (his) raptures” straight.